

The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

By RANDALL PARRISH

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"I CANNOT ORDER; I AM A SLAVE."

Synopsis.—In 1833 Lieutenant Knox of the regular army is on duty at Fort Armstrong, Rock Island, Ill., in territory threatened by disaffected Indians. The commandant sends him with dispatches to St. Louis. He takes passage on the steamer Warrior and makes the acquaintance of Judge Beauchamp, rich planter, and of Joe Kirby (the Devil's Own), notorious gambler. Knox learns Judge Beauchamp has a daughter, Eloise, and a granddaughter, Rene, offspring of a son whom the judge has disowned. Rene's mother is a negro, and she and her daughter, never having been freed, are slaves under the law, although the girls have been brought up as sisters. Kirby induces the judge to stake his plantation and negro servants on a poker hand unfairly dealt by Joe Carver, Kirby's partner. Kirby accuses the judge of cheating. Beauchamp, infuriated, drops dead. Knox tries to induce Kirby to give up his stolen winnings. Kirby and Carver throw Knox overboard. The lieutenant swims ashore and reaches a hut. Knox lies unconscious for ten days. Recovering, he finds he is in a cabin owned by Pete, a "free nigger," who had shot him, mistaking him for an enemy. His dispatches have been forwarded. Recovering from his wound, Knox sends Pete to bring Haynes, Beauchamp's lawyer, and they arrange, with Pete's help, to get the women to the cabin of an abolitionist, Amos Shunk, before Kirby comes. At the Beauchamp place Knox overhears a conversation between the sheriff and his deputy, and learns the truth about the situation. He is witness to an interview between Kirby and a girl who says she is Rene Beauchamp. Kirby insults the girl, and Knox attacks him. Believing Kirby dead, Knox explains affairs to the girl, and she agrees to try to escape with him. They fall to find Pete where he had been posted, so Knox seizes the sheriff's keelboat, along with Sam, the slave left in charge, and they begin their voyage up the river. Next day a steamer passes and Sam recognizes Kirby on board. At Shunk's place they find a dead negro, treacherously shot down from behind, lying in the woods near the cabin. It is a stunning surprise.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

He was slow in following, hanging back as I approached closer to the motionless form, and I could hear the muttering of his lips. Unquestionably the man was dead; of this I was assured before I even knelt beside him. He lay on his face in a litter of dead leaves, and almost the first thing I noticed was the death wound back of his ear, where a large-caliber bullet had pierced the brain. His exposed hands proved him a negro, and it was with a feeling of unusual repugnance that I touched his body, turning it over sufficiently to see the face. All at once I knew him, unable wholly to repress a cry of startled surprise as I stared down into the upturned face—the dead man evidently murdered, shot treacherously from behind, was Free Pete. I sprang to my feet, gazing about blindly into the dim woods, my mind for the instant dazed by the importance of this discovery. What could it mean? How could it have happened? By what means had he reached this spot in advance of us, and at whose hand had he fallen? He could have been there only for one purpose, surely—in an attempt to guide Eloise Beauchamp and the quadroon Della. Then what had become of the women? Where were they now?

I stumbled backward to the support of the log, unable to answer any one of these questions, remembering only in that moment that I must tell Rene the truth.

"Tell me—please," she begged. "Is the man dead? Who is he, do you know?"

"Yes," I replied desperately. "He is dead, and I recognized his face. He is the negro Pete and has been killed, shot from behind."

"Pete," she echoed, grasping at the log to keep erect, her eyes on that dimly revealed figure in the leaves. "Free Pete, Carlton's Pete? How—could he have got here? Then—the others must have been with him. What has become of them?"

"It is all mystery; the only way to solve it is for us to go on. It can do no one any good to stand here, staring at this dead body. When we reach the cabin we may learn what has occurred. Go on ahead, Sam, and we will follow—don't be afraid, boy; it is not the dead who hurt us."

She clung tightly to me, shrinking past the motionless figure. She was



She Clung Tightly to Me, Shrinking Past the Motionless Figure.

not sobbing; her eyes were dry, yet every movement, each glance exhibited her depth of horror. I drew her closer, thoughtless of what she was, my heart yearning to speak words of comfort, yet realizing there was nothing left me to say.

"Do not mind me," she said, pausing before the utterance of each word to steady her voice. "I—I am not going to break down. It—it is the suddenness—the shock. I—I shall be strong again in a minute."

"You must be," I whispered, "for their lives may depend on us."

It was a short path before us and became more clearly defined as we advanced. A sharp turn brought us into full view of the cabin, which stood in a small opening, built against the

sidehill, and so overhung with trees as to be invisible, except from the direction of our approach. We could see only the side wall, which contained one open window, and was a one-room affair, low and flat-roofed, built of logs. Its outward appearance was peaceful enough, and the swift beat of my pulse quieted as I took rapid survey of the surroundings.

"Sam," I commanded, "you are to remain here with Rene, while I learn the truth yonder. Yes," to her quick protest, "that will be the better way—there is no danger and I shall not be gone but for a moment."

I seated her on a low stump and left them there together, Sam's eyes rolling about in a frightened effort to perceive every covert in the woods, but the girl satisfied to watch me intently as I moved cautiously forward. A dozen steps brought me within view of the front of the cabin. The door had been smashed in and hung dangling from one hinge. Another step, now with a pistol gripped in my hand, enabled me to obtain a glimpse within. Across the punchon threshold, his feet even protruding without, lay a man's body; beyond him, half concealed by the shadows of the interior, appeared the outlines of another, with face upturned to the roof, plainly distinguishable because of a snow-white beard.

CHAPTER IX.

The Trail of the Raiders.

Shocked and unmanned as I was at this discovery, to pause there staring at those gruesome figures would have only brought fresh alarm to the two watching my every movement from the edge of the clearing. Gripping my nerves, I advanced over the first body, watching for any sign of the presence of life within the cabin. There was none—the work of the murder had been completed, and the perpetrators had fled. The dead man, with ghostly countenance upturned to the roof rafters, and the snowy beard, was undoubtedly the negro helper, Amos Shunk. Pete's description of the appearance of the man left this identification beyond all dispute. He had been stricken down by a savage blow, which had literally crushed in one side of his head, but his dead hands yet gripped a rifle, as though he had fallen fighting to the last.

The other man, the one lying across the threshold, had been shot, although I did not ascertain this fact until after I turned the body over sufficiently to reveal the face. This was disfigured by the wound and covered with blood, so that the features could scarcely be seen, yet I instantly recognized the fellow—Carver. Surprised out of all control by this unexpected discovery, I steadied myself against the log wall, fully aroused to the sinister meaning of his presence. To a degree the complete significance of this tragedy instantly gripped my mind. If this fellow Carver had been one of the assailants then it was absolutely certain that Kirby must also have been present—the leader of the attack. This inevitably meant that both men had been aboard the steamer, and later were put ashore at the mouth of the Illinois. And, now that I thought about it, why not? It was no accident, and I wondered that the possibility had never occurred to me before. The gambler naturally knew all the gossip of the river, and beyond question he would be aware of the reported existence of this underground station for runaway slaves. It was common talk as far down as St. Louis, and his mind would instantly revert to the possibility that the fleeing Rene might seek escape through the assistance of Shunk.

The mysterious vanishing of the boat would serve to increase that suspicion. Even if this had not occurred to him at first, the steamer would have brought news that no keelboat had been seen on the lower river, while the captain of the John B. Glover, or someone else on board, would have been sure to have mentioned the negro helper and suggest that he might have had a hand in the affair. To follow that trail was, indeed, the most natural thing for Kirby

by to do. He had not overtaken Rene because she was not yet there, but he had unexpectedly come upon the other fugitives, and, even though the encounter had cost the life of his henchman, Carver, it also resulted in the death of two men who had come between him and his prey—the negro and the abolitionist. The scene cleared in my brain and became vivid and real. I could almost picture in detail each act of the grim tragedy. The two revengeful trackers—if there were only two engaged, for others might have been recruited on the steamer—must have crept up to the hut in the night or early morning. Possibly Kirby had learned of some other means of approach from the big river. Anyway the fact that Shunk had been trapped within the cabin would indicate the final attack was a surprise. The negro might have been asleep outside and met his death in an attempt at escape, but the old white man, finding flight impossible, had fought desperately to the last and had killed one antagonist before receiving his death blow. This was all plain enough, but what had become of Kirby, of the two women—Eloise and the quadroon mother?

Uncertain what to do or how to act, I could only turn to the waiting girl and the negro to tell them what I had found.

They listened as though scarcely comprehending, Sam uttering little moans of horror, and appearing helpless from fright, but Rene quiet, merely exhibiting her emotion in the whiteness of her face and quickened breathing. Her eyes, wide open, questioning, seemed to sense my uncertainty. As I ended the tale and concluded with my theory as to what had occurred following the deed of blood, her quick mind asserted itself.

"But this must have happened very lately; the fire still smoldered, you said. When do you think that steamer could have landed here?"

"Why, perhaps early last evening."

"And it has not occurred to you that the boat might have waited here while the man Kirby went ashore?"

"No; that could scarcely be true, if the steamer was transporting troops; what was it you were thinking about?"

"It is all dark, of course," she said slowly, "we can only guess at what happened. But to me it seems impossible that the man Kirby could have accomplished this alone—without assistance. The boat we saw at the landing was not his; it must have been Pete's, and there is no evidence of any other trail leading here from the river. If, as you imagine, he knew the captain of that steamer, and some of the other men aboard were Missourians and defenders of slavery, he would have no trouble in enlisting their help to recover his runaway slaves. They would be only too glad to break up an abolitionist's nest. That is what I believe has happened; they came ashore—in a party, and the steamer waited for them."

"And you think the prisoners were taken along? Yet Kirby would not want to transport them up the river."

"As to that," she insisted, "he could not help himself. He needed to get away quickly, and there were no other means available. He could only hope to connect later with some craft south-bound on which to return."

"You may be right," I admitted, impressed, yet not wholly convinced. "But what can we do?"

She looked at me reproachfully. "You should not ask that of a girl."

The words stung me. "No; this is my task. I was thoughtlessly cruel. Neither can we remain here, only long enough to bury those bodies. It would be inhuman not to do that. Sam, there is an old spade leaning against the cabin wall—go over and get it."

He started on his mission reluctantly enough, glancing constantly backward over his shoulder to insure himself of our presence and carefully avoiding any approach to the open door.

Unpleasant as our task was it proved to be less difficult of accomplishment than I had anticipated. There were blankets in the cabin bunks, and in these I wrapped the bodies. They were too heavy, however, for me to transport alone, and it required some threatening to induce Sam to give me the assistance necessary to deposit them in the shallow grave. Only the fear that I would not have him with us longer compelled his joining me. He was more frightened at the thought of being left alone than of contact with the dead. Sam filled in the loose earth, rounding it into form, and the two of us stood above the fresh mound, our bent heads bared to the sunlight, while I endeavored to repeat brokenly a few words of prayer. Now our first necessity was food. Of this I found a fair supply, and compelling Sam to assist me, we hastily prepared a warm meal over the open fire. It was eaten without, no one of us desiring to remain in the midst of that scene of death; and the very knowledge that the dread burial was completed and that we were now free to depart brought to all of us a renewed courage.

It scarcely seemed probable that one man alone, or even two men, had committed this crime, and the sole survivor disappear so completely with the prisoners. I had turned each detail over and over in my thought, while I worked, yet to but little purpose. The only present solution of the problem seemed to be our return to that hidden basin where our boat lay, and then remaining there in concealment until the darkness of another night rendered it safe to once more venture the river.

I spoke of this to her, as I finally approached where she rested on the stump, eager and glad to escape from all memories of that somber cabin I had just left.

"You—you are no longer so confident," she said; "your plan has failed?"

"I am afraid it has," I admitted, "for it was based altogether on the assistance of Amos Shunk. He is no longer alive, and I do not know where to turn for guidance. There would seem to be danger in every direction; the only question is—in which way lies the least?"

"You begin to regret your attempt to aid me?"

"No," impulsively. "So far as that goes I would do it all over again. Your safety means more to me now than ever before—you must believe that."

"Why should I? All I have brought you is trouble. I can read in your face how discouraged you are. You must not think I do not understand. I do understand—perfectly. What you have done has been only a response to impulse; merely undertaken through a spirit of adventure. Then—then why not let it end here, and—Sam and I can go on to—whatever is before us? It is nothing to you."

"You actually believe I would consent to that?" I asked in startled surprise at the vehemence of her words. "That I could prove such a cur?"

"But why not? It would not be a cowardly act at all. I could not blame you, for I have no claim on your service—never have had. You have done a thousand times too much already; you have risked honor, reputation, and neglected duty to aid my escape; and—I am nothing to you—can be nothing."

"Nothing to me?"

"Certainly not. Why speak like that? Have you forgotten again that I am a slave—a negro? Think, Lieutenant Knox, what it would mean to you to be caught in my company; to be overtaken while attempting to assist me in escaping from my master. Now no one dreams of such a thing, and no one ever need dream. You have had your adventure; let it end here. I shall be grateful to you always, but—I cannot bear to drag you deeper into this mire."

"You order me to leave you?"

"I cannot order; I am a slave. My only privilege is to request, urge, implore. I can merely insist that it will be best—for us both—for you to go. Surely you also must realize that this is true?"

"You have been brooding over all this," I said gently, "sitting here alone, and thinking while we worked. I am not going to answer you now. There is no need. Nothing can be done until night, whatever we decide upon. You will go back with us to the boat?"

"Yes; I simply cannot stay here"—her eyes wandering toward the cabin.

I took the lead on the return, finding the path easy enough to follow in the full light of day. The sincere honesty of her plea—the knowledge that she actually meant it—only served to draw me closer, to strengthen my determination not to desert. Her face was ever before me as I advanced—a bravely pathetic face, wonderfully womanly in its girlish contour—appealing to every impulse of my manhood. I admitted the truth of what she said—it had been largely love of adventure, the rash recklessness of youth, which had brought me here. But this was my inspiration no longer. I had begun to realize that something deeper, more worthy, now held me to the task. What this was I made no attempt to analyze—possibly I did not dare—but, nevertheless, the mere conception of deserting her in the midst of this wilderness was too utterly repugnant for expression. No, not that; whatever happened it would never be that.

The last few rods of our journey lay through thick underbrush, and beneath the spreading branches of interlacing trees. Suddenly I emerged upon the bank of the creek, with the rude log wharf directly before me. I stopped transfixed, staring at the water—nothing else greeted my eyes; both the boats were gone.

This unexpected discovery came to me like a blow; the very breath seemed to desert my lungs, as I stared down at the vacant stream. We had been outgeneraled, tricked, and all our theories as to what had occurred were wrong. The duty we had performed to the dead had cost us our own chance to escape. Instead of being alone, as we had supposed, we were in the midst of enemies; we had been seen, watched, and while we loitered ashore the murderers had stolen our boat and vanished, leaving us

there helplessly marooned. All this was plain enough now, when it was already too late to remedy the evil. The struggling girl emerged through the tangle of shrubs and paused suddenly at my side, her lips giving utterance to a cry of surprise.

"The—the boat! It is not here?"

"No; there is not a sign of it. Those fellows must be still in the neighborhood; must have seen us when we first came."

"But what are we to do?"

I had no ready answer, yet the echo of utter despair in her voice stirred me to my own duty as swiftly as though she had thrust a knife into my side. Do? We must do something! We could not sit down idle there in the swamp. And to decide what was to be attempted was my part. If Kirby and whoever was with him had stolen the missing boat, as undoubtedly they had, they could have possessed but one purpose—escape. They were inspired to the act by a desire to get away, to flee from the scene of their crime. They must believe that we were left helpless, unable to pursue them or create alarm. Yet if it was Kirby why had he fled so swiftly, making no effort to take Rene captive also? It was she he was seeking.



"Certainly Not. Why Speak Like That? Have You Forgotten Again That I am a Slave—a Negro?"

ing; for the purpose of gaining possession of her these murders had been committed. Why, then, should he run away when he must have known the girl was already in his grasp? The same thought apparently occurred to her.

"You—you believe that Kirby did this?"

"What other conclusion is possible? We know that he passed us on the steamer—Sam saw him plainly. It was his man, Carver, whom we found dead in the hut. It could have been no one else."

"But," she questioned, unsatisfied, "he would have only one reason for being here—hunting me, his slave. That was his one purpose, was it not? If he saw us then he must have known of my presence, that I was here with you. Why should he make no attempt to take me with him? Why should he steal our boat and run away?"

"One theory is as good as another," I said, "and mine so far have all been wrong. What do you make of it, Sam?"

"Who, sah? Me, sah?"

"Yes, take a guess at this."

"Pears like," he said, deliberately, rubbing his ear with one hand, "as how it might have happened dis yere way, sah. Ah ain't a-sayin' it was—it might be. Maybe Massa Kirby neber got no sight ob us 'tall, an' was afeerd fer ter stay. He just knowed a party was yere—likely 'nough sum Black Abolitionists, who'd be huntin' him if he didn't c'lar out, just so soon as dey foun' dat Amos Shunk was dead. Here wus his chance, an' he done took it."

He bent suddenly forward, his glance at the edge of the log. "Dey ain't took but just de one boat, sah, fer de odder am shoved under dar out'r sight."

As I stooped further over I saw that this was true, the small rowboat, with the oars undisturbed in its bottom, had been pressed in beneath the concealment of the log wharf, almost completely hidden from above, yet to all appearances uninjured. The very fact that it should have been thus left only added to the mystery of the affair. If it had been Kirby's deliberate purpose to leave us there stranded ashore why had he failed to crush in the boat's planking with a rock? Could the leaving of the craft in fit condition for our use be part of some carefully conceived plan; a bait to draw us into some set trap? Or did it occur merely as an incident of their hurried flight? These were unanswerable questions, yet the mere knowledge that the boat was actually there and in navigable condition promised us an opportunity to escape. While hope remained, however vague, it was not my nature to despair. Whether accident or design had been the cause made no odds—I was willing to match my wits against Kirby and endeavor to win. And I must deal with facts just as they were.

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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